

[By Jack Thurston](#)

Skip Hoblin will never forget what happened at his Waterbury, Vt. car dealership, SnowFire Auto, more than eight months ago.

"This was the high water mark," he sighed, pointing to a spot on his door at mid-thigh height.

The same floodwaters from Tropical Storm Irene that trashed Waterbury's downtown ruined 33 of Hoblin's cars.

"I never thought about giving up," the businessman said. "It's not in my nature."

That same pluckiness is on display in the rest of this central Vermont town of nearly 5,000 as it scrapes its way back from disaster.

Complicating the recovery, the sprawling state office complex is largely empty. Approximately 1,300 workers are now assigned to facilities out of town, meaning fewer customers for shops and restaurants.

There is light at the end of the tunnel for businesses still feeling the pinch of the quiet complex. It just may be a very long tunnel. The state plans to return upwards of 1,000 workers there in two to three years.

"I'm very optimistic now about the future," said Waterbury town manager Bill Shepeluk.

Shepeluk said realistically, full recovery for Waterbury may take five to 10 more years.

On Thursday, FEMA, along with state and local officials, held a conference to brainstorm Waterbury's next 10 years. The destroyed police station and town offices need permanent fixes. Other ideas, like an arts center and business incubator space, could move the town away from reliance on the state offices.

"As devastating as [Irene] was," Shepeluk said, "And no one wishes it upon anyone else, and we don't want to go through another one, it is really an opportunity to reinvent the community."

The storm could also shape the way the federal government responds to future disasters. Skip Hoblin told Congressman Peter Welch, D-Vt., that the aid process for businesses needs a closer look.

"To get a loan, he was going to have to come up with three years worth of information, and of course, all his records were swept away in the flood," Welch said.

Already, Vermont has received \$275 million in federal disaster relief money, Rep. Welch's office said. That covered repairs to transportation infrastructure, private homes through FEMA grants, and other projects. All told, Welch expects the federal total for relief money to reach \$500 million.

"That's good," Welch said. "It's kept Vermont's budget from being upside-down. But no matter what Washington did, volunteers made the difference here."

Welch was referring to the army of volunteers who descended on the main street to muck out basements and remove debris from downtown Waterbury. They are widely credited with speeding along the initial disaster response.

Back at SnowFire Auto, several of the cars have license plates reading, "I am Vermont Strong." Insurance helped get the business back on its feet, but Hoblin said the loss of the state office workers is a pinch he feels daily.

"That was 18 or 20 percent of my business," he explained.

Still, Hoblin said he is positive Waterbury can bounce back. He added that he is excited to be a fixture in this community long-term, even if the full recovery takes several more years.

"Absolutely!" Hoblin beamed.